

# **Primary Challenge: Anti-Incumbency Voting Patterns in State Legislative Elections**

*Incumbents Defeated in State Legislative Primaries*

*At Higher Rate in 2012 than in 2010*

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Ballotpedia

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## Introduction

Anti-incumbent animosity is making itself felt in state legislative elections. Incumbent members of state legislatures in 2012 are being defeated in primary elections at a rate far higher than in 2010, according to research conducted by Ballotpedia. Released today, the research finds that as of July 25, 2012, a total of 2,301 incumbent state legislators have sought re-election. Of that total, 513 incumbents have faced primary opposition, and 76 have been defeated by their primary challengers. In all of 2010, by comparison, 4,985 incumbents sought re-election, of which 1,133 faced primary opponents and 95 lost. This means that in 2010, 8.38 percent of incumbents who faced a challenger in their primary were defeated, while the comparable figure for 2012 is 14.8 percent, for an increase of 76.7 percent.

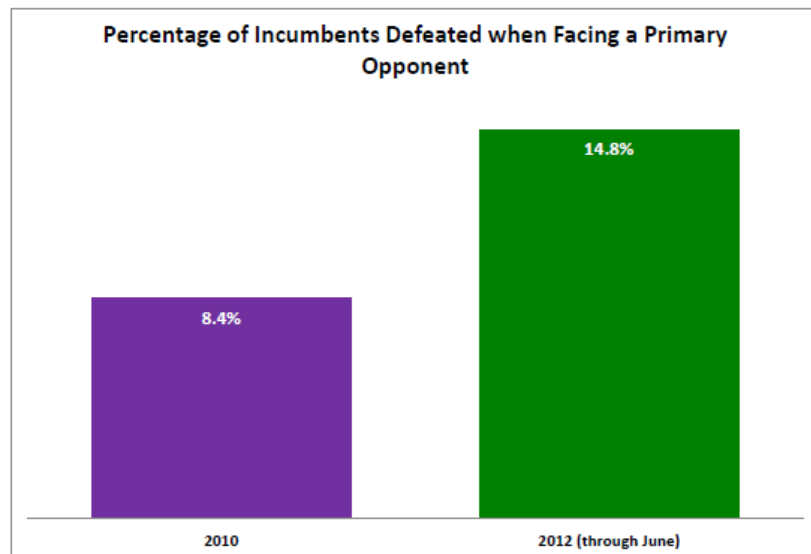


Figure 1

The fact that so few incumbents lose in their primary elections is further evidence that incumbents at the local, state and federal levels alike still enjoy overwhelming advantages in fundraising, name recognition, media coverage and partisan support. Once elected, most incumbents face no primary opposition. In 2010, for example, 77.3 percent of incumbents ran unopposed. And when incumbents are challenged, they usually defeat their challengers.

Because most legislative districts are dominated by one of the major political parties, a victory in the primary almost assures an easy victory in the general election -- a pattern seen repeatedly in studies of state and federal elections. In states that have held primaries so far in 2012, the percentage of incumbents who faced no challenge in their primary elections remained high at 77.5 percent.

While the percentage of incumbents defeated in primaries in 2012 might seem low, the increase is nonetheless impressive. Redistricting may have played a role; in the 2012 primaries, 40 of the 44 states are using maps different from those used in 2010. A number of these redistricting efforts were challenged in the courts, and some were thrown out as the primary elections drew near. While redistricting is usually assumed to make it more difficult for incumbents to be re-elected, the unsettled nature of district boundaries also meant that all candidates were scrambling to adjust to these new district boundaries and re-arranging their campaign strategies accordingly.

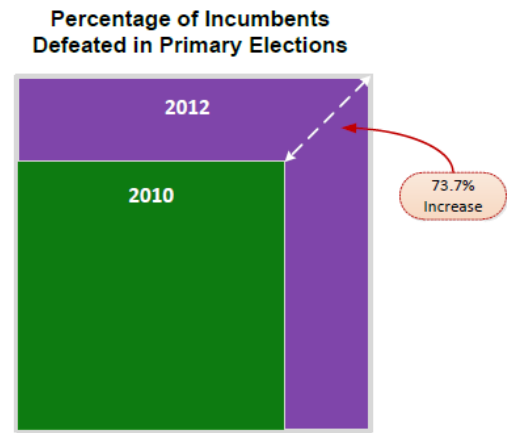


Figure 2

Such developments made challenging an incumbent in a primary election even more difficult than it was in 2010, when redistricting did not take place. The costs of campaigns may have been driven higher, and candidates taking on entrenched officeholders historically have found it difficult to raise money.

Finally, it is significant that a pronounced “anti-incumbent” sentiment already existed in 2010, which benefitted challengers no less than it did in 2012. A possible explanation for the higher victory rate for challengers is that the higher win rate for challengers in the 2010 general elections triggered more aggressive challenges this cycle. Emboldened by the results of 2010, stronger candidates may have come forward to challenge incumbents in 2012.

### Statistical Breakdown

The new research shows that in 2010, 4,985 incumbent state legislators sought re-election. Only 1,133 of these incumbents faced any primary challenge, meaning a staggering 77.3 percent ran unopposed, and were heavily favored in the general election. Only 95 of these 1,133 incumbents, or 8.38 percent, were defeated in their primary. In 2010, 507 incumbents were defeated in general elections. A full 88 percent of incumbents were re-elected.

The figures for 2012 are not dramatically different, as of July 25, except in one respect. So far this year, 2,301 incumbents have run for re-election in primaries. Only 513 of those incumbents have faced primary challenges, for a percentage of 22.29. Just under half of all

primaries (48.70 percent) have been held, and 76 incumbents have been defeated. Twelve of these 76 lost to a fellow incumbent, in districts whose boundaries were changed. Even subtracting these incumbents, the rate of defeats is higher than in 2010.

The percentage of incumbents who have sought re-election so far in 2012 that ultimately met their demise is only 3.3 percent. Despite this low figure, it represents a significant increase from 1.9 percent in 2010. This trend, should it hold throughout the 2012 election cycle, could signal a historic shift taking place in American elections, albeit it one that faces profound obstacles for it to re-orient the nature of these elections.

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### **Historical Context**

Primaries, which date to the Progressive Era in American politics, were introduced into our electoral system in the hope that they would make for more competitive elections. According to Stephen Ansolabehere's "The Decline of Competition in U.S. Primary Elections, 1908-2004," November 2005:

Progressive reformers at the turn of the last century promoted the direct primary as a way to undercut the power of local and state political machines and as a way to bring into the parties fresh candidates, new ideas, and organized constituencies.

Despite the potential they represent, primaries have not achieved the results their earliest proponents expected. Historically, few voters have bothered to vote in primaries. The best estimates available suggest that about 8.5 percent of Democrats and 11 percent of Republicans historically have voted in their party's primaries.

But the importance of primaries has not totally escaped the attention of some perceptive activists who in the 2000s tried to seize the opportunities primaries represent. This led to a new verb entering the American political vocabulary, as a new tactic was employed. As early as 2004, "to primary" had come to mean "mounting an aggressive primary campaign against an incumbent." These aggressive campaigns were usually engineered by ideological groups opposing an incumbent on ideological grounds. For all the attention given to campaigns against high-profile incumbents in Congress, such as Senators Arlen Specter and Joe Lieberman, these

efforts failed to shift attention from presidential campaigns to congressional races, much less to state legislative elections.

A careful analysis of primary challenges to congressional incumbents from 1970 through 2008, in fact, showed “little change in the number of such primary challenges over this time period,” according to Robert G. Boatright’s “Getting Primaried: The Growth and Consequences of Ideological Primaries,” prepared for the State of the Parties Conference, Ray C. Bliss Center, the University of Akron, October 14-16, 2009. Generally, primaries have been most competitive in an open seat race, but least competitive when the incumbent is running. In other words, primaries have had a limited role in holding representatives accountable.

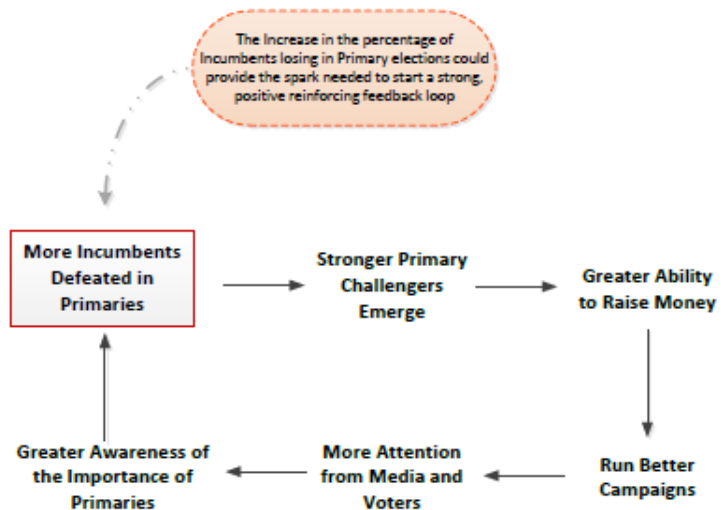
Although there have been notable upsets in this year’s congressional primaries, such as that of incumbent Sen. Richard Lugar of Indiana, the opportunities presented by primaries have yet to be seized, either in races for seats in state legislatures or for congressional seats. The recent findings, however, suggest that if trends hold, primaries may in time bring “fresh candidates” and “new ideas” to American elections.

### **Further Research**

Further research into the rate at which Americans voted in primaries might shed additional light on another plausible explanation for the increased percentage of victories by challengers. That is the likelihood that voters today are coming to a greater understanding of the importance of primary voting, especially in so-called “safe seats,” where a victory in a primary assures a victory in the general election that follows.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that voters are indeed voting in greater numbers in primaries because they understand that it is in primaries that the real decisions about who represents them are made. In the primaries in which incumbent Reps. Jean Schmidt of Ohio and Silvestre Reyes of Texas were defeated earlier this year, more voters participated than in years past.

In these races, the Campaign for Primary Accountability (CPA), a Super-PAC with a goal to level the playing field in primaries for challengers, participated in three races that led to the defeat of incumbent members of Congress by non-incumbents: Schmidt (OH-2), Reyes (TX-16), Tim Holden (PA-17). The early betting -- and even most of the late bets -- said all three would survive. They had institutional support: In Holden's case from organized labor; Reyes also had endorsements from President Obama and President Clinton. While redistricting was a factor in the defeat of Holden, the longest-serving member of the Pennsylvania delegation, his margin of defeat directly correlated with spending: He lost by the same percentage by which he was outspent. Increased turnout (as well as the Campaign for Primary Accountability) was a decisive factor in Reyes' loss.



**Figure 3: The connected process of challenger success leading to more competitive primaries.**

Eleven thousand more ballots were cast in the 2012 primary than in 2010, giving challenger Beto O'Rourke the few hundred votes he needed to put him over the 50 percent mark and avoid a runoff with Reyes.

CPA was also involved in the race in Illinois's 16<sup>th</sup> congressional district in which 20-year incumbent Don Manzullo was defeated by freshman Adam Kinzinger. Redistricting pitted the two members against each other in the primary. Manzullo had a long relationship with many of the voters in the newly drawn district and had been favored to win. After these defeats, the media paid particularly close attention to this new method of providing greater challenges to incumbents in primaries.

It is also likely, as further research might also show, that donors are also beginning to understand the importance of primary elections and are contributing more generously to the campaigns of primary challengers. It is also likely that news organizations are also coming to recognize the pivotal role primaries play in determining the composition of legislatures at the

state as well as the federal level. The defeat of six-term incumbent Sen. Richard Lugar of Indiana in that state's Republican primary in May shifted attention to primaries in which seemingly entrenched incumbents were challenged. The successful efforts to defeat congressional incumbents, including Schmidt of Ohio and Reyes of Texas, in their primaries, have also focused media attention, if only momentarily, on congressional primaries. (During a presidential year, news organizations devote their resources overwhelmingly to presidential campaigns.)

These trends, if true, would of course reinforce themselves: More primary challengers will come forward, with greater confidence in their ability to win; this would lead to larger war chests, encouraging still more challengers. The media would cover these races, creating a greater sense of awareness of and excitement about primaries.

### **Implications**

That even a small number of incumbent state legislators find themselves challenged in their primaries is an encouraging development to Americans who believe that more competitive elections make for better governance. However encouraging this trend might be, much work remains to be done if our elections are to become not only more competitive but also more representative of the electorate.

## **About Ballotpedia**

Established in 2007, Ballotpedia is an online almanac about state politics, elections and election law. It includes



information about the U.S. Congress, state legislatures, ballot measures (including ballot measure law, school bond and tax elections, recall elections and local ballot measures), and state executives. Ballotpedia's staff includes 15 researchers and writers, as well as volunteer writers and editors. It is published by the non-profit, non-partisan Lucy Burns Institute, which is based in Madison, Wisconsin.

## **About the Author**

Geoff Pallay is Special Projects Director for Ballotpedia, where he oversees the Congressional and State Legislative teams, and manages the redistricting content. Prior to joining Ballotpedia in 2010, Geoff worked for the South Carolina Policy Council as a Policy Analyst. A Boston resident, he has a master's in Public Administration from the College of Charleston and a bachelor's in History and Journalism from Emory University.



## Appendix

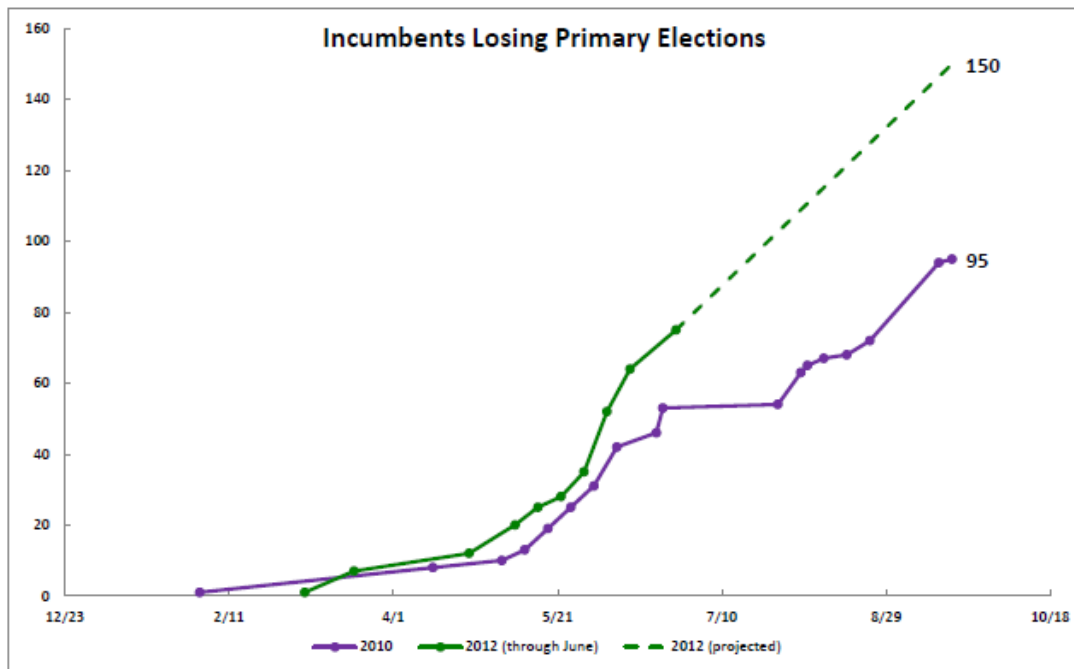


Figure 4

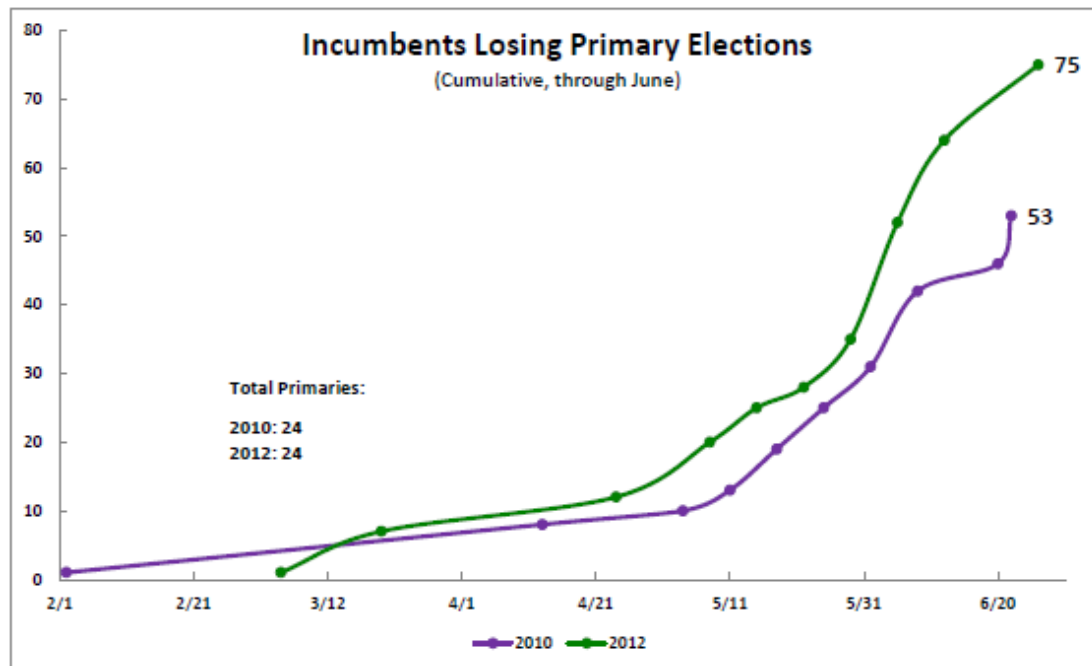


Figure 5